THE CHURCHES IN COUNCIL: OXFORD EDINBURGH HANGCHOW

By

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THE CHURCHES IN COUNCIL
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By WILLIAM PATON

THERE is no perceptible lessening in the number and vigour of the voices that tell us of the failure of the Church—using the word 'Church' in all the many senses in which it is used. Perhaps it is not for the good of the Church that the volume of criticism should lessen, provided that Christians are set upon hearing within it not only, or primarily, the complaint of man but the voice of God. Yet in recent months there has come to be heard another note in the public chorus. Mingled with often violent criticism, there is to be found a recognition that there are some services which nothing but the Church can render to the world, and that it can render those services only if it is a true Church and eschews the advice so often proffered to it: to serve the world by being something different from a Church. It is, indeed, becoming clear that whatever charges may be brought against any part of the Church in its empirical form, the patent bankruptcy of man's search both for truth and for community is turning many to ask again of the Church, this despised and derided Church, what after all it has to say, and what in the present world-crisis it has to do.

But it is not so much recognized that in fact the present days are beholding an effort on the part of the Church, in nearly all its branches, to clear its mind and to gird itself for action, such as certainly has not been known within modern times. The fact that when such a process in a divided Christendom begins to become conscious and articulate it necessitates the holding of world conferences is enough to cause many people to dismiss the idea with an impatient shrug. The day for conferences,

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we are told, has passed. Yet it is not those who know most intimately the work that is done in such gatherings who join in this facile criticism. It is obviously unjust to condemn as futile the meeting of Christians for thought and prayer and planning after long corporate preparation; what is condemned, and justly, is the idea that the mere meeting of people of different races and traditions will by itself conduce to any useful end.

To-day a considerable number of the men and women who bear office and hold places of influence in the church organizations of most of the countries of the world are engaged in one or other of the pieces of study that are the prelude to three gatherings of a truly momentous character. These are the conference on Church, Community and State, to be held at Oxford in July 1937; the conference on Faith and Order, to be held at Edinburgh in August 1937; and the meeting of the International Missionary Council, to be held in Hangchow, China, in October 1938. The purpose of the present paper is to show not merely how, as organizations, they are related—a useful study but not one of desperate importance—but how the themes with which they are concerned dovetail together and how close they lie to the heart of the world's need.

Let us look for a moment at the instruments that the Church (using that word in the widest sense) has at hand for this work of thought and planning. In 1910 at Edinburgh there was held the World Missionary Conference—one of the few gatherings of which it seems safe to predict that its importance will grow and not diminish with the years. Some of those present recognized that if there was to be developed on a great and growing scale the co-operation of Christians thoughout the world in the missionary task, the problem of the disunion of the Christian forces would have to be faced, and those stubborn questions of difference in Faith and difference in Order resolutely essayed. Hence in 1927 at Lausanne the World Conference on Faith and Order, a continuation committee set up there to carry on the work, and now a second great gathering of the churches through their appointed delegates in Edinburgh this year.

Another and distinct strain of thought and activity has been associated with the name 'Stockholm.' If it is the name of Bishop Brent that will longest be associated with Lausanne it is that of Archbishop Söderblom that clings to the Stockholm conference of 1925. This was a world gathering to consider the practical tasks of Christianity in the present social and economic order. It drew some part of its significance from the fact that it was the first great world gathering of Christians to which the German churches were able to send delegates after the close of the world war. It set up a council known as the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work. This body, after some years of a not unnatural uncertainty in policy, was led to focus its attention upon the great characteristic problem of our time, the relations between the Church, the state and the community. In the study of the complex subjects that are subsumed under this title it has been able to enlist, chiefly through the leadership of Dr J. H. Oldham, many of the ablest Christian minds of the world. The first stage—and only the first stage—of this œcumenical labour will be brought to a head at Oxford in the present summer.[1]

Meanwhile the world missionary movement (out of which as a mere matter of historical fact all the rest sprang) went on after 'Edinburgh 1910' with a continuation committee which later became the International Missionary Council, based upon national missionary organizations in the western countries and upon councils of churches and missions in the East, in Africa and in Latin America. In 1928 the Council held a meeting at Jerusalem in which for the first time a considerable fraction of the delegates came from the 'younger churches' of the lands to which the missionaries had gone. Next year the logic of events is to bring about a gathering of the Council in China at which actually a small majority of the delegates will be from these 'younger churches.'

Now let us look at the themes which have been posed for the consideration of these three œcumenical gatherings. They

[1] A useful summary of the problems to be discussed at Oxford is in H. S. Leiper's *Christ's Way and the World's—in Church, State and Society.*

will be further discussed and their relevance brought out, but even when their titles are stated certain thoughts rush to the mind. Here they are.

Oxford; July 1937:
- The Church and the Community.
- The Church and the State.
- The Church and the Economic and Social Order.
- The Church and Education.
- The Universal Church and the World of Nations.

Edinburgh; August 1937:
- The Christian Doctrine of Grace.
- The Church and the Word of God.
- The Ministry and Sacraments.
- The Church's Unity in Life and Worship.

Hangchow; October 1938:
- The Church—with especial reference to the building up of the younger churches as part of the historic universal Christian fellowship, and with particular consideration of
- The Faith by which the Church lives.
- The Witness of the Church in Evangelism.
- The Life of the Church.
- The Church in relation to its Environment.
- The need for closer Co-operation.

A list of titles such as this is at best an uninspiring thing, but even in such a bare list there stands out something of quite remarkable importance. It is the central and dominating place that is given throughout to the Church. This is the case not merely, let it be noted, in the gathering which at Edinburgh will be properly concerned with those issues generally deemed ecclesiastical, but almost more, it would seem, at the gathering which is to be concerned with the great movements of secular humanity and at that which deals with the carrying of the Gospel to all the races and peoples of mankind. It is not by accident nor by a careless overlapping with the subject-matter of another gathering that the Christians who gather at Oxford and Hangchow to look together at the Christian task in a day of utter perplexity and need are going to focus their attention upon the Church.

Why this concentration of attention on the Church? It is

because the Church, if we consider its true nature, the charter and essential doctrine that should rule its life, lies at the heart of things. It is founded upon the belief that there has come to the world a Word of God, and that man's duty is to hear and receive and obey that Word. Again, the Church exists as a worshipping society, and to worship is to bear testimony to the existence of that Other than ourselves from whom all human values take their meaning and without whom they are cheap and poor. On that side of its life, therefore—the Godward side—if the Church's witness is true it is of quite infinite moment to the world. But the manward side of the Church is of not less significance for the world in its present need. It is

> a witness to the true meaning of community. There is no witness of which the world stands in greater need to-day. Over against a self-seeking individualism on the one hand, and an impersonal collectivism on the other, the Christian faith proclaims that the true meaning and satisfaction of life are found in the relation of persons with persons. It finds the ground for this assertion not in any merely human longing for fellowship, but in the fact that God has entered into personal relations with men, calling them into communion with Himself, and thereby to responsible selfhood.[1]

Moreover, this community is not a mere accommodation to the *status quo* but instinct with transforming power. It believes that both men and the world can be changed. It is not, as human societies are, limited in scope by some human condition such as race or language, but is essentially universal, finding its unity in its one Head, Christ Jesus.

This is, beyond question, what the Church of the New Testament is and is to be. Where there has been failure it is not as in human designs when a big plan 'does not quite come off'; there is, so Christians believe, a divine plan at work, and in penitence and faith there may again be resort to the eternal fountains of renewal. But the point here is that what the Church in its deepest heart has to say and to be is of supreme relevance to the world.

It is not possible here to do more than refer to those features of the modern situation, so often told and never the less tragic

[1] J. H. Oldham, *The Question of the Church in the World of To-day*, pp. 12–13.

for the telling, which most brutally force themselves upon the Christian conscience. We face something far more serious than that 'secularism' to which the Jerusalem meeting pointed in its famous Message. There has been on the one hand a progressive disintegration of society, of moral ideals and of authority of every kind; much of life has become impersonal and nothing is more terrifying to the average man than the sense that he is in the grip of impersonal forces that can neither be understood nor controlled—which is what unemployment, for instance, means to masses of mankind. The dominant social idea of the western world has been the autonomy of the individual, something often confused with the liberty of the Christian man, but in reality an atomizing and mechanizing notion, resulting now in a widespread revulsion towards ideas of the opposite order. Here is the characteristic feature of our modern day, that in the place of the dethroned gods, and to stay the flood of disintegrating tendencies, there have been called in new gods, of race or class or nation. To these gods men look to save them; round these governing ideas is being built up authority anew; in the service of these gods men find again the satisfaction of irrational self-giving that had been denied to them in the only world they knew.

Something of this is true for myriads in Russia, Germany, Italy, Japan, India—the difference of form between fascism and communism ought not to blind us to this essential similarity. And if in such regions as the Anglo-Saxon countries or Scandinavia, where it seems that these violent passions do not yet rage, we feel ourselves superior to the tumult, it is well to remember that in more than one country of those mentioned above it would have seemed incredible a few short years ago that any such state of things could so soon come about.

In the face of all this the Church is charged with an eternal message. It is that God in Christ has entered into fellowship with men and that this is the basis of true community. The life of Christians in the world is to be a life within the new community of divine love, wherein Christ and His Spirit rule.

> The gifts and the demands of this new community constitute the source and the standard of membership in all other forms of community life. The conditions of human loyalty find their standard of perfection in obedience to God. Out of this there grows 'the Christian alternative' as a living reality within and among the conflicting forms of belief, ways of living and social ideals of every succeeding generation.[1]

Yes—it is all true; and it is deceptively easy to rest upon words like these, which we know to reflect a reality. But if the Church in the world to-day is to be true to its calling, it must face both the extent to which in fact it condones its own betrayal of these principles and—what is almost more difficult—the need for a sustained effort, which must be to a considerable extent an intellectual effort, to gain light upon the practical consequences of these truths, consequences in regard to which the Christian mind to-day is both bewildered and divided.

Within the limits of this short paper I can do no more than suggest one or two of the central *cruces* which must be faced —there are many others which will become plain to those who read the material produced in preparation for these meetings.

First, what does the Church mean by Revelation? Is there a Word that God speaks and has spoken? Wherein is it to be found? How may it be known? There is no profounder question that can be asked, for upon the answer depends the whole of the Church's claim to have something of infinite worth and relevance to say in the world tumult. But, it may be said, of course Christians agree that there is such a Word of God. Do they? There are two different types of division among them. There is the cleavage between those who hold to Revelation in some intelligible sense and those who have gone gravely far towards an identification of the Christian faith with an aspect of human culture. There is, among those who hold to Revelation, the difference between those who identify the Word of God with the text of the Bible, those who hear the voice of truth only in an infallible Church and those who seek to discern a Word of God to which both Bible and Church bear witness.

Second, the matter of disunity is a gross evil of which, in

[1] From one of the Oxford preparatory papers.

spite of formal expressions of grief, the mass of Christian opinion is culpably tolerant. The causes of disunion have been thoroughly explored, and it is idle to minimize the fact that in regard to such a vital matter as the mode of the communication of God's grace to men Christians have held views so far apart, at least in their formal statement, that organic division became religiously necessary. But if in this year of grace the churches through their representatives can do no more than solemnly repeat the matters wherein they conscientiously differ, it were a thousand times better that they had never met. There are two things that would condemn such a futility. The first is the depth and reality of the unity that is in fact enjoyed. Consider that vast range of united activity, not only though perhaps most conspicuously in the mission field, in which the churches engage. Even in regard to that central rite of love which we have made into a symbol of division—the Holy Communion —when Christians speak positively of what they know it is humbling and amazing to find how greatly they agree. No one who was present will forget a meeting of the Faith and Order Committee, at which, during two hours, different members spoke in this positive way of what they knew. There were many who as they left said to one another: 'Why then are we divided?' But the other reason is the fact of the world's need. Are we not guilty of a terrible hypocrisy when, in the face of a world seeking for community amid the dissolution of the old certainties, we speak of God in Christ and the life of true community, but are not able to give a worthy expression to what we know to be a real unity in Christ?

Third (and here we turn from the task of wrestling with our own internal weaknesses to the perplexities of the Christian witness in the life of the world), there is what many feel to be the central problem of Christian ethics in their bearing upon the corporate life of the world. To call it the problem of compromise is to begin with an almost question-begging title. Is Christian love (the Greek *agape*) to be the guiding principle in all relations of life, and if so may Christians acquiesce in corporate action which is based on any lower principle? There

is deep division on this point, and until some agreement is reached (which can never be except by going even deeper than the differences) the practical witness of the Church is rendered pitiably weak. On the one hand there are those who say that nothing less than love can ever be the Christian's conscious aim. He knows that as a sinful man he will not achieve it, but he must not consciously cease to aim at it. He should be deaf to prudential warnings about consequences; they are not his business, but God's. On the other hand there are those, a larger number, who say that the conditions of corporate life in mixed societies are such that it is not only impossible to aim consciously always at attaining the way of love but it is self-deception even to think that we do. Action that affects any large number of people must be in accordance with some kind of rule or formula, it cannot be spontaneous, and the Christian ethical ideal can be reached only as there is the welling up of spontaneous feeling and devotion. But any moral action carried out according to a rule or formula must fall below what is possible to the individual in spontaneous emotion. We must therefore fall back either upon the conception of a natural moral law, on which the corporate life of society can be based, with the witness of Christians within it seeking always to bend it towards the higher law of love; or, with at least one powerful school of European thinkers, we should regard the structure of custom and moral idea that underlies the life of society as a framework within which our lives are set, not Christian and not capable of being made Christian, but at least saving man from chaos and therefore to be defended and obeyed. These are radically different views, but they are all held by Christians, and they lead to entirely opposite results in practical action. It is needless to say that the question of the participation of the Christian in war will be settled differently according to the answers given to this fundamental question.

Fourth, what are Christians to say and to do about the economic order? To some extent the answer here will be governed by what is said in reply to my third question. But the urgency of the issue is such as to make comment superfluous.

The terrible de-personalization of life for the industrialized masses, the power that the present order gives to the few over the very life of the many, the apparent inability of mankind within the existing order to square the advance in efficiency made possible by technological improvements with the removal of chronic unemployment—these are only some of the facts that have aroused in countless hearts all over the world the longing for another manner of life and the conviction that it can be attained. Is there a Christian word about this? It does not at all matter whether it is popular, or chimes readily with what men would like to hear. But it does matter that a living Church should have a living word of God to deliver.

A last type of problem. We speak much of the impending clash between Church and state and we think (if we are Christians) mainly in terms of state interference with Christian freedom. But if we look at the matter for a moment from the side of the state—from the point of view, let us say, of a keen and far-seeing education minister with enlightened notions about education—the position is not so simple. He knows that educationists, Christians not least among them, have insisted that the end of education is not to pour facts into the child but to develop his personality. But this means a view of the world (what is now, alas! all too often called an 'ideology'). You could pour bits of Latin into John without worrying about John's view of life, but you cannot in the true sense educate John without knowing what you want him to believe about life. 'Very well,' says our minister of education, 'I shall see to it that the schools of this country train the young in a view of things that the rulers of the country believe in and hold to be for the country's good and glory.' I know no more genuine problem than this. From the point of view of the Church, the state is trying to be a sort of Church—at least to lay down principles about the meaning of life which belong to God and His service. But from the point of view of the serious national educator (and there are many of them, not least in the governments of the lands of Asia to-day) a smaller body within the state is arrogating to itself the right to withstand the corporate

will and is denying to the state the right to pursue education along the lines most earnestly urged by Christian educators themselves—unless, of course, the state educational mind agrees with the Christian. This is not the place to argue the whole matter, but I hope to have shown that the problem is a stubborn one because in a sense (as in all the stiffest problems) there is right on both sides.

And so one might go on. These crucial questions are not of the West alone. In the discussions at Oxford and at Edinburgh, because the great mass of the delegates will have come from Europe and America it is natural that the framing of the thought should be mainly in western terms. But there is no one of these points that I have mentioned above, nor of the many others that have as much claim to be included, that does not as truly affect the work of the Church in the great lands of the East and of Africa, as will be shown at the Hangchow gathering. Revelation—is there any world mission at all without certainty upon that? Without that certainty we are lost in uneasy shuffling answers to the fundamental question put by such men as Mr Gandhi: 'What do ye here?' Unity among Christians—how tragic, how absurd are our divisions when they suffer the sea-change and reappear in India and China; how significant the fact that it is in the East, where the line between the Church and its task seems more clearly drawn, that the call to unity is most insistent. The problem of Christian action in the life of the world and the challenge of the existing economic order are as keenly felt by the younger thinking Christians in the East and in Africa as they are by us of the West—and not only by the Christians. A distinguished Indian official, himself a Hindu, once said to me, speaking of social reconstruction: 'You Christians must give the lead. Your religion has been articulated in reference to these questions as ours has not.' And the question last mentioned is soon to be the most overshadowing of all. Education is seen by all the intelligent governing minds of the world to be the one method above all by which their 'ideologies' can be spread and fostered. The freedom of Christian education grows steadily less the

world over. Turkey, Egypt, Iran, China, Manchuria, Korea, Japan all offer evidence of this. The other day the Führer told the German nation that the Reich would educate the young and the Church should not, but his is only one of many voices that the East can hear to-day speaking a doctrine foreign to what the West has taught in past years.

It is in no formal spirit that one asks that for these gatherings, in which the Church takes stock of herself and of her task, there should be deep and insistent and believing prayer. For there is, perhaps, a danger that we should allow ourselves to think that our business is like the cleaning and mending of a machine, and that if only we can get our mechanism right and if only we can see our task more clearly and if only we can get some better brains to work—well, the Kingdom of God will come.

Nay, but when we have done all, we are unprofitable servants. Our deepest need, which we must humbly beg our God and Father to grant to us, is faith—faith not in ourselves but in Him. To beg for this faith, to ask that the life of God may be seen even in the sinful and imperfect lives of Christians—to pray this prayer is the chief political, the chief social, the chief theological task of the Church.

Lord, we believe. Help Thou our unbelief.

WILLIAM PATON

A SURVEY OF THE YEAR

A noteworthy feature of the Review is the Annual Survey by the Editors which appears in each January number. It provides a general view of the conditions, social, political and economic in which the Church has been working in the different countries during the year.

ARTICLES IN THE JULY 1937 NUMBER

The Churches in Council: Oxford—Edinburgh—Hangchow	W. Paton
Pre-Nineteenth Century Evangelism: Its Outstanding Characteristics	K. S. Latourette, Ph.D.
Religion in the Japan of To-day	A. K. Reischauer, D.D.
The Ministry in Bantu Religion	N. S. Booth, Ph.D.
Group Conversion	A. L. Warnshuis, D.D.
The Future of Churches and Missions in India	H. Gulliford
Christianity and Imperialism	G. C. Binyon
Contemplation and the Apostolate	
The Norwegian Mission in Madagascar	Ole B. Meyer
Medical Missions in Belgian Congo	C. C. Chesterman, M.D., M.R.C.P.
The Sunday School in the Welsh Presbyterian Mission Field of Assam	Oliver Thomas
Lessons in Missionary Devolution	T. T. Brumbaugh
Christian Missionaries—We do not want them any more: An Arya Samaj Statement	
My Spiritual Conception of Good Friday	Chiang Kai-Shek

Book Reviews. A Pioneer Missionary in Nigeria. C. E. Padwick.—A Vindication of Early Missions in South Africa. A. V. Murray.—Muslim Women To-day. K. H. Henrey.—Buddhism and Hinduism. H. W. Schomerus.—International Affairs. W. Paton.—The Jewel of Asia. F. W. S. O'Neill.—Christian Teaching by Correspondence. M. H. Bickersteth.—Captives in China. M. M. Underhill.—A Missionary and his Work. F. Allshorn.—Youth Must Choose. Paul Braisted.—Some Little-known Holy Lives. G. E. Phillips.—Sons of the Indigenous Churches. M. M. Underhill.—Nationalism and Missions. K. G. Grubb.—The Church of Rome. W. Paton.—Shorter Notices.

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